

## **School Panel Review Report South Lawrence East School Lawrence Public School District**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the School Panel Review Process is to assist the Commissioner of Education in determining whether State intervention is needed to guide improvement efforts in schools where students' MCAS performance is not at a level that reaches the school's Adequate Yearly Progress targets in English language arts or mathematics or both. The South Lawrence East School met these criteria and was one of 15 schools selected for panel review in Fall/Winter of 2004-05. The panel review was conducted on November 16 -17, 2004.

The review panel's charge was to analyze data and written information on the school's performance and improvement efforts, visit the school, and meet with school and district officials in order to advise the Commissioner on the answers to the following two key questions:

1. Does the school have a sound plan for improving student performance?
2. Are the conditions in place for the successful implementation of the school's improvement plan(s)?

The panel's responses to the two key questions that defined the scope of its review are included in this report. These findings and conclusions are the product of the panel's analysis, discussion, and observation, based on the evidence available to it. A list of panel members who participated in the review is provided in Appendix A. A detailed schedule of the panel's activities is provided in Appendix B.

The panel's findings and conclusions on the two key questions will be forwarded to the Commissioner of Education for consideration, together with school performance data, in determining whether South Lawrence East School is deemed under-performing. The panel was not asked to formulate a sound plan for school improvement where such a plan does not presently exist or to recommend a course of action to create the conditions for successful implementation of sound improvement strategies where such conditions at present do not appear to exist. Diagnostic and/or prescriptive intervention, where needed to assist an under-performing school, occurs at the next stage of the school review process.

### **South Lawrence East School Profile**

The South Lawrence East School is one of eight elementary/middle schools in Lawrence. The school serves students in grades 1 - 8. Over the last four years, enrollment at South Lawrence East has decreased from 1,454 in 2001 to 1,174 as of October 1 this 2004 school year. Student demographics at the school have remained fairly stable over the same time, with several notable changes.

Between 2001 and 2004, the proportion of Asian students attending South Lawrence East has slightly increased, from 4 percent in 2001 to 7 percent in 2004, while the percentage of Black students has remained at 2 percent for the past three years. This year, 79 percent of students are reported in the Hispanic subgroup, similar to the 77 - 80 percent reported in earlier years. The percentage of White students has decreased from 16 percent in 2001 to 12 percent in 2004. In 2004, 87 percent of South Lawrence East's students were from low income families. This proportion is similar to previous years, with the exception of 2003, when 73 percent were reported in this category. In 2004, 10 percent of students are reported as being Limited English Proficient, which is a substantial decrease from the 24 - 28 percent reported in prior years. This school year, 13 percent of students are receiving special education services, which is 1 percent lower than last year.

In 2004, South Lawrence East registered an attendance rate of 96.3 percent, with students absent 6.2 days on average. The school's retention rate was 0.8 percent in 2003, the last year for which these data are available. Out-of-school suspensions were reported at 4.4 percent, less than the State's 6.1 percent average. The rate of 2003 in-school suspensions was reported at 4.8 percent and the school's exclusion rate of 5.5 percent was nearly triple the State's 2.0 percent average.

### **Staffing**

The 2004-2005 South Lawrence East School's staffing report indicates that the school is composed of 4 administrators, 88 teachers, 4 guidance counselors and 1 psychologist. Approximately 34 percent of educators at the school have been there for three or fewer years. Nearly 89 percent of teachers are licensed in their current teaching area.

### **MCAS Overview**

Students at the South Lawrence East School are assessed in grades 3, 4 and 7 in English language arts (ELA) and in grades 4, 6 and 8 in mathematics. The school has made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in ELA since 2001. The school has not made AYP in mathematics since AYP determinations were first issued in 1999. In the school's Cycle III End-of-Cycle AYP Report (2003-2004), the school made AYP in ELA in the aggregate and for all five of its reported subgroups: Limited English Proficient, Special Education, Free/Reduced Price Lunch, Hispanic, and White.<sup>1</sup> In mathematics, the school failed to make AYP in the aggregate and for one of the reported subgroups: Free/Reduced Price Lunch. The school is currently identified for Restructuring in mathematics and has no Accountability Status in ELA.

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<sup>1</sup> In accordance with the federal No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2001, student performance is disaggregated by the following subgroups: Limited English Proficient, Special Education, Free/Reduced Price Lunch, African-American/Black, Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Native American, and White. A minimum of 40 students (or 5% of the total number of students assessed, whichever is greater) per subgroup is required to issue a statistically sound rating or determination of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The subgroups meeting the minimum sample size at South Lawrence East in 2004 were Limited English Proficient, Special Education, Free/Reduced Price Lunch, Hispanic, and White for both ELA and mathematics.

## **Student Performance in English Language Arts**

### **GRADE 3**

#### **Regular Education**

At the grade 3 level in Reading, the performance of regular education students remained relatively constant from 2001 to 2003, with a slight decline in the percentage of Proficient students in 2004. In 2001, 40 percent of students were found Proficient, 53 percent performed at the Needs Improvement level and 8 percent were at the Warning level. By 2003, the percentage of Proficient students increased to 44 percent, 46 percent were at Needs Improvement and 10 percent scored in the Warning category. In the most recent administration of the MCAS test, the percentage of students who scored at the Proficient level decreased to 38 percent, while the percentage of students at the Warning level remained at 9 percent.

#### **Special Education**

Results for Special Education students in grade 3 Reading showed a performance gain from 2001 to 2002 and a performance decline from 2003 to 2004. In 2001, 77 percent scored in the Warning category; this figure decreased to 49 percent in 2002 and to 50 percent in 2003. In the most recent administration of the test, 61 percent scored in Warning and 39 percent were in Needs Improvement. In 2004, no students scored in the Proficient category, as compared to 6 percent in 2003. In 2003, 18 students only were included in this category; in 2004, 23 students were included.

#### **Limited English Proficient**

The performance of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students on the grade 3 Reading tests decreased from 2001 to 2003. Fewer than 10 students were tested in 2004; as such, no results are reported for that year. In 2001, 56 percent of LEP students scored in the Proficient range and 7 percent were in Warning. In 2003, the percent proficient decreased to 12 percent and the percent in Warning increased to 48 percent.

### **GRADE 4**

#### **Regular Education**

Results for regular education students in grade 4 ELA are variable, but show a slight performance decline from 2001 to 2004. In 2001, 2 percent of students scored in the Advanced range, 29 percent in Proficient, 57 percent in the Needs Improvement range and 12 percent in Warning. In 2003, these ratios were similar, with the percent in Warning increasing to 17 and the percent in Proficient decreasing to 23. In 2004, 5 percent were Advanced, 28 percent were Proficient, 43 percent were in Needs Improvement and the percentage in Warning climbed to 24.

### **Special Education**

The performance of Special Education students in grade 4 ELA has improved slightly from 2001 to 2004. In 2001, 6 percent scored in the Proficient range, 9 percent were in Needs Improvement and 84 percent were in Warning. By 2004, the percent Proficient had increased to 9, while the percent in Warning had decreased to 64.

### **Limited English Proficient**

Scores for LEP students in grade 4 ELA have been variable between 2001 and 2004. No students scored above Needs Improvement in 2001 and 2002. The percentage of students in Warning during these years was 68 percent in 2001 and 55 percent in 2002. From 2002, the percentage of students in Warning has increased to 73 percent in 2003 and 82 percent in 2004. In 2003, 21 percent were in Needs Improvement, with 6 percent Proficient; in 2004, 18 percent were in Needs Improvement and no students were in the Proficient range. Only eleven students were included in the 2004 results.

## **GRADE 7**

### **Regular Education**

Results for regular education students in grade 7 ELA were stable between 2001 and 2002. The year 2003 represented a slight performance decline, while 2004 performance was the highest of the four years. In 2002, 3 percent of students scored in the Advanced range, 36 percent in the Proficient range, 55 percent in the Needs Improvement range and 6 percent in Warning. In 2003, 30 percent were in Proficient, 59 percent in Needs Improvement and 11 percent in Warning. In 2004, the percent Proficient climbed to 52 percent and the percent in Warning decreased to 6 percent.

### **Special Education**

Results for Special Education students in grade 7 ELA have been somewhat variable. The highest performance is evident in 2002 and 2004. In 2002, 60 percent of students scored in the Needs Improvement range and 40 percent in Warning. In 2004, 5 percent were in Proficient, 40 percent in Needs Improvement and 55 percent in Warning. In 2003, 74 percent scored in the Warning category; the remaining students were in Needs Improvement.

### **Limited English Proficient**

The performance of LEP students has decreased from 2001 from 2004, though the small populations assessed lead to variability in the results. Half of the 10 LEP students assessed in 2004 scored in Needs Improvement, while the other 50 percent were in Warning. In 2003, when 30 students were included, 3 percent were Advanced, 13 percent were Proficient, 37 percent were in Needs Improvement and 47 percent were in Warning. In 2001, the percent Proficient was 27, the percent in Needs Improvement was 27 and 45 percent were in Warning.

## **Student Performance in Mathematics**

### **GRADE 4**

#### **Regular Education**

The performance of regular education students in grade 4 mathematics has improved slightly from 2001 to 2004. In 2001, 1 percent of students scored in the Advanced range, 7 percent in Proficient, 42 percent in Needs Improvement and 49 percent in Warning. By 2004, 13 percent were Proficient, 41 percent were in Needs Improvement and 45 percent were in Warning, representing a slight increase in the percent Proficient and a slight decrease in the percent in Warning.

#### **Special Education**

Scores for Special Education students in grade 4 mathematics were stable between 2002 and 2003. In 2004, some improvement is evident. In 2003, 16 percent scored in Needs Improvement and 84 percent in Warning. In 2004, the percent in Needs Improvement increased to 32, and the percent in Warning decreased to 68.

#### **Limited English Proficient**

Only one year of data is available for LEP students in grade 4 math. In 2003, 27 percent were in Needs Improvement and 73 percent scored in the Warning range.

### **GRADE 6**

#### **Regular Education**

The scores of regular education students on the grade 6 mathematics tests have improved somewhat between 2001 and 2004, with the largest gains shown between 2003 and 2004. In 2001, 1 percent of students scored in the Advanced range, 11 percent were Proficient, 29 percent were in Needs Improvement and 59 percent scored in Warning. In 2003, 8 percent scored in Proficient, 39 percent in Needs Improvement and 52 percent in Warning. In 2004, 7 percent were Advanced, the percent Proficient increased to 17, the percentage in Needs Improvement was 39 percent, and the percentage in Warning decreased to 40 percent.

#### **Special Education**

The performance of Special Education students in grade 6 mathematics has remained critically low between 2001 and 2004. The percentage of students scoring in the Warning category was 97 - 100 in all four years.

#### **Limited English Proficient**

Data for LEP students in grade 6 mathematics are available for 2001 and 2003 only. In both years, the percentage of students scoring in the Warning category was near 90 percent, with the remainder scoring in Needs Improvement or Proficient (3% in 2003).

## **GRADE 8**

### **Regular Education**

Scores for regular education students in grade 8 mathematics have remained fairly stable between 2001 and 2004, with a gradual decrease in the percentage of students in the Warning category. In 2001, 1 percent of students scored in the Advanced range, 7 percent in Proficient, 30 percent in Needs Improvement and 62 percent in Warning. In 2004, 2 percent were Advanced, 11 percent Proficient, 37 percent were in Needs Improvement and 50 percent were in Warning.

### **Special Education**

From 2001 to 2003, all Special Education students scored in the Warning category in grade 8 mathematics. In 2004, 4 percent scored in the Needs Improvement range; the remaining students were in Warning.

### **Limited English Proficient**

Results for LEP students in grade 8 mathematics are available for 2003 only. In that year, 95 percent scored in the Warning range and 5 percent were in Needs Improvement.

## **PANEL RESPONSES TO THE KEY QUESTIONS**

### **KEY QUESTION 1: DOES THE SCHOOL HAVE A SOUND PLAN FOR IMPROVING STUDENT PERFORMANCE?**

No. South Lawrence East has not adequately identified root causes to address persistently low achievement rates across student groups and school programs. The Comprehensive Education Plan (CEP) does not prioritize specific needs, lay out specific or appropriate learning objectives or offer a clear instructional action plan that is likely to reduce current performance gaps. As a result, the CEP is not specific enough to guide the improvement initiatives necessary to increase student performance at South Lawrence East.

#### **A. Has the school analyzed appropriate data and program information to accurately identify the gaps in student performance and determined why those gaps exist?**

No. Although South Lawrence East (SLE) does analyze results from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and utilizes other standardized assessments, the school has not clearly and consistently examined and/or integrated this data to identify why student learning gaps exist.

The primary source of information for measuring student performance at South Lawrence East is the MCAS. Student Performance Goals in the Comprehensive Education Plan (CEP) align with the necessary MCAS gains students must achieve in order to meet the federal requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and state improvement targets. In interviews with district administrators, school leadership and staff, MCAS results were

expressed in terms of a pass/fail criteria. Documentation of this type of analysis was represented in the school's display of its MCAS results in two-line graphs as well as the District's publication of student performance results in documents reviewed by the Panel. It is the judgment of the Panel that little information regarding student performance gaps can be gained from this type of data analysis.

The school has completed some MCAS item analysis for the aggregate population, which identifies question types that presented difficulty for SLE students. As a result, South Lawrence East has identified specific content areas in which their student performance is low. In mathematics, for example, the Leadership Report and the CEP identify fractions, measurement, geometry and algebra as areas of student weakness. However, this analysis does not indicate specific skills that students lack and, as a result, SLE has not identified performance gaps specific enough to guide improvement efforts or to develop causal factors that explain low student achievement at the school.

The Comprehensive Education Plan does not include a causal analysis as to why these performance gaps exist, nor were faculty and staff able to articulate specific causes for low student performance. The Panel was presented with an additional document by the Instructional Leadership Team, Worksheet 4-C, which documents causal factors. However, as stated causes, they lack specificity and do not appear to relate to even the limited data analysis that the school has completed to identify student performance gaps. For example (*Worksheet 4-C*):

- Need consistent assessment
- Teachers need to use a variety of teaching strategies

These causes are identified across all mathematics programs and grade levels school-wide, failing to specify various assessment systems (formal or informal) or types of instructional strategies that need to be varied. It was not clear to the Panel how the lack of consistent assessment or a limited variety of teaching strategies were derived as causal factors based on the analysis that was done, nor how these factors have resulted in low student performance. In interviews and focus groups with teaching, SLE personnel could not articulate that limited use of varied instructional strategies or the lack of inconsistent assessment results were causal factors influencing student achievement. Furthermore, there is no obvious connection between these stated causes and the content areas identified as weak through MCAS analysis and stated in the CEP.

Although South Lawrence East does administer various assessments, the school does not have a systematic method in place for integrating multiple data sources, nor is it clear how additional assessment information, other than MCAS analysis, is used to inform plans outlined in the CEP. In English language arts (ELA), additional assessments include the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) and the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI). In Mathematics, SLE utilizes the district's 10-week Math Assessment and unit assessments from *Investigations* at the lower grade levels and Module Assessments from the *Connected Mathematics Program* at the middle school level. In addition, the school reports that teacher observations further inform identification of student skill deficits in both ELA and Math. The only additional analyses provided to the

Panel, however, were results from the DRA, which revealed grade level performance gains but showed no indication of further analysis to identify areas of student weakness or causal factors.

SLE's analysis of student performance does not contain any information specific to the two primary subgroups at South Lawrence East – special education students or English language learners (ELLs), other than MCAS results that are provided to the school. The Cycle III Improvement Composite Performance Index (CPI) for both of these subgroups revealed gains in both ELA and math. However, there does not appear to have been any analysis conducted to determine why gains were made or to link these gains to particular and deliberate instructional changes to elicit increased performance for these subgroups nor are they articulated in the current improvement plan. It is the judgment of the Panel that failure to review disaggregated student performance for these subgroups across content areas and grade levels is a critical deficiency in program analysis at the school.

South Lawrence East does not use multiple sources of data to inform student performance gaps, although they are available at the school. The school has not disaggregated data or identified accurate causal factors for student performance to determine why achievement gaps exist. Therefore, the Panel concluded that in its current state, the school's analysis of data and identification of student performance gaps are not likely to yield the necessary improvements at the school.

**B. Does the plan set out specific improvement objectives that are grounded in the school's analysis of the reasons for poor student performance?**

No. The South Lawrence East Comprehensive Education Plan sets forth student performance goals, as well as student learning objectives, that are focused on teaching and learning. However, because data analysis is limited and student achievement is considered in terms of a "pass/fail criteria," performance goals and learning objectives are designed to address all student groups, as well as student needs at multiple grade levels. The CEP contains improvement objectives that are vague, do not include methods for ongoing assessment and, as a result, are not specific enough to address the needs of all SLE students. It is the judgment of the Panel that the objectives in the CEP are inadequate as a guide to increase student achievement at South Lawrence East.

Student Performance Goals in the CEP are clear, measurable and based on an analysis of MCAS performance gains necessary to meet targets for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which is in accordance with the school's expression of MCAS results based on a pass/fail criteria. Further, MCAS scores at South Lawrence East have shown inconsistent trends in the percentage of students performing in the Proficient category in either ELA or math. Yet the plan reflects specific goals for increasing student performance at the Proficient level. In addition, the performance goals throughout the CEP are geared to the end of Cycle III, which has already passed.

For example:

- “Increase the annual distribution of student performance in the High Needs Improvement and Proficient/Advanced Performance Levels for Mathematics in grades 4, 6 and 8 from 21.8% (2003 mid-cycle) to 42.2% for the end of cycle III” (*Comprehensive Education Plan, p.34*).

Student Learning Objectives are tied to the performance goals and do contain a focus on teaching and learning (*Comprehensive Education Plan, p.32*).

- “Students will explore numbers greater than and less than one by extending the number line.”

The CEP also lays out an Improvement Objective (Desired (Student) Learning Experience) that includes Measurable Outcomes (*Comprehensive Education Plan, p.32*).

- “Students will demonstrate an understanding of locations of fractions on a number line in a variety of mathematical applications”
  - “Students will demonstrate mastery of related skills such as temperature”
  - “Demonstrate knowledge as assessed through classroom, district and state assessments”

As evidenced above, student learning objectives are tied to improvement objectives as written in the CEP. Improvement objectives, however, are less specific than student learning objectives, measurement outcomes are vague and benchmarks or other indicators to guide the ongoing assessment of student learning are not provided. Without specific measurement guidelines that clearly address the desired student learning outcomes – for example, “mastery” – it is difficult to ensure that student learning needs are being addressed and, therefore, that performance rates at SLE will increase.

Student learning and improvement objectives in the CEP are intended to address *all students* collectively at multiple grade levels in this school of 1,174 students. The South Lawrence East CEP includes objectives for two student groups: “All students grades 1-5” and “All students grades 6-8.” However, as identified in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, both content areas and the skill sets students must possess at each respective grade level are different. Utilizing the student learning objective above – “Students will explore numbers greater than and less than one by extending the number line” – is not likely to address the skills needed for *all students* at the 1st grade level as well as *all students* at the 3rd grade level. As written, these objectives are not specific and, combined with a lack of a complete analysis of student skills across student groups and academic levels described in the previous section of this report, are not likely to yield the necessary improvements at South Lawrence East.

Lastly, because performance goals and objectives are written to address the needs of all students, the CEP does not include specific student learning or improvement objectives to address the specific needs of the Special Education or ELL population. Failure to address the specific needs and learning objectives for these subgroups again suggest insufficient analysis and planning of improvement objectives at the school, as 13 percent of the

student population at South Lawrence East consists of special education students, 10 percent Limited English Proficient and 79 percent First Language Not English.

**C. In order to accomplish each improvement objective, does the plan specify strategies which appear likely to lead to improved student results?**

No. Because the South Lawrence East Comprehensive Education Plan does not contain learning or improvement objectives that are specific and because the school's analysis of student performance gaps does not focus on root causes that are clearly linked to low achievement, the Panel could not conclude that identified strategies were sufficient to impact weaknesses in student performance at South Lawrence East.

The CEP contains instructional change objectives that are linked to the desired improvement objectives. As noted in the CEP, however, these instructional change objectives are activities or teacher-directed efforts that may support a strategy, but most fail to address specifically how implementation will influence student achievement.

For example:

- “Teachers will show students how to order and find equivalent fractions and mixed numbers” (*CEP, p. 32*)
- “Teachers will provide opportunities for students to identify and extend patterns and allow for them to create patterns independently” (*CEP, p. 34*)

While it is possible that “showing” or “providing opportunities” to students may result in learning, these strategies do not contain sufficient detail to link teaching to learning or specify how instructional practices should be implemented in order to accomplish the desired student performance outcome(s).

Though the CEP possesses outcome measures, they are not specific enough to assess whether student learning is occurring or to inform necessary instructional change. Nearly every math objective for students in grades 1-5 indicates the following measurable outcomes (*CEP, pp. 32-36*):

- “Students will demonstrate (the stated skill).”
- “Demonstrate knowledge as assessed through classroom, district and state assessments.”

In the Panel's judgment, the methods for measuring student attainment of the learning objectives, especially those in math, are vague and do not indicate what assessment systems will be utilized or what specific performance rates will be set as the standard. Without further specificity, it is difficult to conclude that the instructional strategies and/or activities will be effective.

In addition to those listed in the CEP, South Lawrence East has implemented other strategies to address low student performance and the school's status as “restructuring” in mathematics (a consequence of five years of failure to achieve AYP). SLE utilizes the TERC *Investigations* curriculum for grades 1-5 and the *Connected Mathematics Program*

(CMP) in grades 5-8, as mandated by the district. New this school year, as indicated in the School Leadership Report and confirmed in teacher interviews, South Lawrence East has increased its focus on mathematics and also implemented several new structural strategies:

- Increased instructional blocks in mathematics to 90 minutes daily for grades 6-8
- Reduced class sizes so they contain no more than 22 students
- Implemented a daily 15-minute “warm-up” to review basic math skills
- At the discretion of school leadership, appointed content specific math teachers who are now responsible for teaching this discipline only.
- Continued commitment and emphasis on the Extended Day Program

While each of these strategies may affect performance at the school, they are structural changes and, therefore, most do not specifically address gaps in curricula and instruction or indicate how these shifts in classroom practices can be measured and linked to changes in student performance.

It is worth noting that the Panel perceived strategies listed in the ELA section of the CEP as possessing clearer links to student learning. Interviews with school leadership, as well as faculty and staff, also suggest a more thorough understanding of how instruction in ELA is tied to student learning. SLE utilizes the Readers and Writers Workshops across grade levels, as well as the Learning to Read by Reading (LRR) model to support literacy efforts. The LRR model began at the lower grade levels and has been expanded to a school-wide model, according to interviews with the Principal. Because these curricula are not utilized by other schools in the District, South Lawrence East utilizes consultants and coaches from Tufts University to monitor implementation, oversight and alignment of the LRR model. In interviews and focus groups, teaching staff were repeatedly able to talk about instructional strategies in ELA, which include the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model and “trajectory of lessons” (which are also documented in the *CEP*, see pgs. 23-24). By identifying student weaknesses on the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), teachers create lesson trajectories intended to pinpoint instruction to address these identified weaknesses. Further, the LRR model also contains a “safety net tutorial” for some struggling readers, which is based on DRA performance and teacher recommendation. Interviews and focus groups with teaching staff suggested a school-wide focus on the ELA curriculum in past years that is evident in their ability to talk about related programs and instructional strategies. Just this year, school personnel indicate an increased focus on mathematics, which suggests reasons for the difference in quality and specificity the Panel saw in the ELA and math plans in the South Lawrence East CEP.

As the CEP does not contain specific improvement objects for ELL and special education students, it also fails to include instructional strategies to specifically address these populations. The Panel repeatedly heard from teaching staff that the school does not utilize specific strategies to address the needs of ELL students. The teacher survey conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE) indicated that the number one professional development need at the school was “effective instructional methods for diverse learners” (62% of respondents (n=94)). Further, the Leadership

Report documents that, because special education and LEP students have shown gains on the MCAS, “specialized efforts applied for those subgroups should continue” (p. 1). The omission of specific learning objectives for special education and ELL students in the CEP appears to contradict the recommendation in the Leadership Report. In the judgment of the Panel, the absence of plans to address the needs of these significant populations is a serious gap.

Because data analysis at South Lawrence East is limited and does not isolate root causes for low student performance, the strategies suggested in the CEP are difficult to link to student achievement and, therefore, are unlikely to facilitate the necessary improvements at South Lawrence East.

**D. Are the school’s written improvement planning document (s) clear and specific enough to guide their implementation of planned improvement initiatives?**

No. It has been well documented in this report that in its written form, the Comprehensive Education Plan does not contain clear, specific or sufficient information to guide the necessary improvement initiatives at South Lawrence East. The CEP does not identify student learning objectives to address the specific needs of students at different grade levels or various subgroups of learners for this large grade 1-8 school. While the school has identified some strategies to address low performance rates, they do not clearly link specific changes in instruction to student learning outcomes.

Members of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) could speak more clearly about use of the written plan to guide daily instructional practices – although, when pressed, they could not articulate more specifically which strategies they would be using to address the student weaknesses identified. Because the CEP fails to include sufficient causal analysis as to why performance gaps exist and because the plan includes a large number of strategies with limited explanation as to how they can be used to elicit increase in student achievement, even ILT members had difficulty explaining the rationale for planned improvement initiatives and assessment measures as clear guidance for addressing the learning needs of the SLE student population. Evidence from teacher interviews and focus groups suggests that the faculty and staff at South Lawrence East do not find the written CEP document sufficiently clear to guide changes in their daily classroom practices. For example, in an interview, when asked whether the document is a clear guide, one teacher stated, “Probably not. I know what I am doing.” Another teacher suggested, “I take a look at the mission statement – the whole plan, it doesn’t help – experience is day-to-day in the classroom.” The CEP does not serve as an effective tool for communicating improvement initiatives or the importance of such activities.

The focus of this report has been on the sections of the Comprehensive Education Plan that address school-wide goals in ELA and Math because these academic areas are primary in addressing the current student performance gaps at SLE. The South Lawrence East CEP includes several additional sections designed to address school-wide reform initiatives and supplement improvement planning. However, as these mirror the broad

definition of all student goals throughout the plan, they fail to include specific strategies for achieving these goals or methods for measuring the effectiveness of their implementation on student achievement. For example:

- The Coalition of Essential Schools Goal is to “Continue investigations of ideas and ideals associated with the Coalition of Essential Schools as a means of examining instructional practice and maintaining high standards for all students” (*CEP pp. 17-20*).

#### **E. Was the School Improvement Plan developed through a process that will support its successful implementation?**

The Comprehensive Education Plan was developed through a process that the principal, the Instructional Leadership Team and some staff described as inclusive. However, beyond a smaller core of involved staff who made up several different teams (the same people served in multiple leadership capacities.), explanations of the process used to derive the CEP were inconsistent and some staff who were not involved in the process expressed little ownership of the plan. Because the CEP does not contain root causes for poor student performance, there is limited understanding among the staff as to how cohesive, school-wide instructional practices and assessment methodologies can be used to influence student performance. As a result, it is the judgment of the Panel that the process used to develop and disseminate improvement plans at South Lawrence East is unlikely to support successful implementation of the improvement strategies.

The initial development of the Comprehensive Education Plan began through a District initiative to guide this process – Performance Improvement Planning (PIP). A representative group of SLE administrators and staff across grade levels and subject areas participated in the PIP process, which included data analysis and review of CEP objectives and causes for identified performance weaknesses. PIP team facilitators shared the components of the CEP with the rest of the staff during grade level meetings in order to obtain feedback on the Plan’s components. The principal ultimately incorporated all of the sections of the CEP into the final product and District leadership reviewed and approved this plan to guide improvement efforts at South Lawrence East. The Panel constructed this description of how the CEP was developed from its collection of reports of the process. The Panel heard varying accounts of this process from staff members, the Instructional Leadership Team, the School Improvement Council, as well as school leadership.

Focus groups and interviews with SLE faculty suggested that teaching staff school-wide are able to articulate the activities involved in the development of the CEP. The Panel could gather little evidence, however, to suggest that widespread buy-in and/or ownership over the improvement planning process exists at South Lawrence East. In response to the question, “Do you know what you are expected to do improve student performance at your school?” on the DOE instructional survey, only 36 percent of those responding (n=83) referenced the Comprehensive Education Plan. Furthermore, being able to explain the process and/or identify the CEP as an improvement initiative is not indicative of its

effectiveness. As revealed in the previous question (1D), most teaching staff at SLE do not find the written CEP to be a guiding document. Another teacher stated, "It (the CEP) looks good on paper, but it isn't."

While SLE faculty and staff seem to understand their basic roles in implementing improvement efforts, the description of responsibilities is inconsistent and they cannot articulate an ongoing process for assessing and monitoring student performance. The primary classroom level mechanism for collecting data on student achievement is through the use of assessment binders that are compiled by classroom teachers. Interviews with instructional staff indicate that, for some, these binders are used frequently as a point of reference but for others, the binder acts just as a keepsake for student work. SLE has made efforts to implement scoring rubrics, portfolios and journals to assess student performance. However, as evidenced in interviews and classroom observations, not all teachers appear to be using these tools consistently. Further, staff members had difficulty consistently describing the purpose of these devices, with only a few connecting the function of these tools as systems for assessing student learning and monitoring instructional practices (interviews and focus groups). One teacher stated, "The intent (to use journals and rubrics) is school-wide. But it is not clear whether it's happening. I don't know what other people do with it – it goes in the assessment binder?"

While there seems to be some consensus among staff members about the areas of student weakness identified in the plan, there appears to be an inconsistent understanding that exists among SLE staff as to how the practices specified in the CEP can be used to guide instruction and affect performance rates at the school. The process used to develop the Comprehensive Education is unclear and school-wide buy-in is not evident. As a result, it is the judgment of the Panel that the process used to establish and disseminate improvement plans at South Lawrence East is not likely to support the current initiatives.

## **KEY QUESTION 2: ARE THE CONDITIONS IN PLACE FOR THE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE IMPROVEMENT PLAN(S)?**

Not sufficiently. Though South Lawrence East has an organizational management structure in place, sufficient materials to guide and supplement classroom practices and a faculty that expresses its support for the planned improvement initiatives, other conditions exist at the school that are likely to limit the implementation of the planned improvement initiatives. Because instructional leadership and oversight is not adequate, a limited understanding of how improvements in teaching strategies can be linked to specific student learning objectives persists at SLE. District oversight of some programs at the school is unclear and the approved CEP does not adequately address the learning needs of subgroups. It is the judgment of the Panel that the absence of these essential elements will make successful implementation of the improvement plan difficult.

## **A. Does the school have effective leadership and sound management?**

The Panel's findings were mixed on management and leadership capacities at South Lawrence East.

In her nine years at the school, the principal has provided stable and forceful management. South Lawrence East is in its seventh year of implementing the Coalition of Essential Schools model supported by a Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) grant. The Leadership Report, interviews with the principal, as well as some teaching staff cite that the CES philosophy and its 10 guiding principles have instilled a common set of beliefs at the school that surround education. Evidence of implementation of the CES model is widespread throughout the South Lawrence East community, with parents, students and staff members alike citing the central role of CES in a SLE education. In interviews and focus groups, staff members suggested that CES gives them a vision for how to do things, a "common language" and a mindset that "all parties are responsible for student learning." The principal has arranged a number of activities and initiatives at the school to further the overarching presence of the CES philosophy, including a multitude of after-school programs and activities, as well as participation in national conferences and workshops. The Superintendent complimented this vision, stating the greatest strength at SLE was a "sense of a community of learners." The principal's commitment to and confidence in the CES model is evident.

In interviews and focus groups, staff members most commonly cited the principal's commitment to organization and the dissemination of data-based documents as overall strengths. These organizational skills were evident to the Panel upon initial impression, as a large number of documents and data displays were available for review. Results from the DOE teacher survey suggested further support the principal's efforts and vision for the school with 90% of staff indicating they "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" that she "provides effective leadership to guide and support staff efforts to improve academic performance."

The principal's management skills are also evidenced by her ability to make decisions, though they might not be considered favorable among all staff members. Given the school's restructuring status in mathematics, the principal implemented content-specific teaching positions for this discipline this school-year in the elementary grades. Assignment to these instructional positions was not voluntary and this restructuring was not met with support from the entire staff. The principal also solicited teachers whom she thought would be the most representative educational leaders to serve on the ILT. Though the Panel cannot speak to the effectiveness of these practices, they do supply evidence that the principal has confidence in her leadership and is willing to make school-wide organizational decisions.

Interviews with the principal and the assistant principals (APs), however, indicate the primary instructional leaders at the school were the APs. Though the roles of the assistant principals were described as instructional leaders and supervisors, there was little evidence that supervision of instruction or oversight is being carried out to guide classroom instruction and, further, to link these practices to student achievement. When

asked in interviews, teaching staff more commonly cited coaches as the source for instructional leadership, but this belief was not widespread. As a result of the ambiguity that surrounded descriptions of instructional leadership, as well as the limited evidence to support that oversight was occurring to guide classroom practices at South Lawrence East, the Panel could not conclude that instructional leadership at the school is sufficient to guide improvement efforts.

According to interviews with school leadership, the three assistant principals are in charge of discipline and instructional oversight for three respective cohorts (grades 1-2, grades 3-5 and grades 6-8) and the principal is involved at an administrative level. The APs engage in a number of activities described as instructional oversight that include attending grade level meetings, checking plan books and participating in learning walks. Interviews with SLE faculty and staff report that each of these efforts occurs across grade levels and content areas. However, it is the judgment of the Panel that because these activities are not used to supply instructional feedback in their current implementation, they are not likely to result in changes in instructional practices that can bring about student achievement gains. Plan books are checked weekly to make sure that they have been completed, but no guidance is available as to the appropriateness or likely effectiveness of planned lessons. While learning walks provided by leadership are reported to occur, feedback is provided in the form of a checklist addressing compliance with specific teaching tasks, but not to provide guidance or assessment of specific instructional practices (teacher interviews and focus groups). In interviews, when asked to describe their roles as instructional leaders, assistant principals cited these activities as methods for supplying instructional oversight. When asked by the Panel how they assess whether student learning is occurring, one AP suggested, "It's just based on walking into the classroom... whether students are engaged and the presentation is enthusiastic." With limited documentation and the absence of a system for feedback and adjustment in place, it is unclear how the large number of instructional changes under implementation at SLE will be instituted and monitored, in either a summative or formative capacity, to increase student performance at the school.

The school possesses a number of coaches – two from Tufts University to support the LRR model, two CES coaches and two instructional coaches that report to the district. Of the two instructional coaches, one oversees the implementation of all literacy/writing curricula school-wide and the other, math and science curricula, also across all the school's grade levels. The role of the coaches as described to the Panel by the coaches is threefold: 1) to visit classrooms; 2) act as an extra pair of hands; and, 3) to locate and disseminate resources. As a result of these additional responsibilities, the Math/Science Coach reports spending only a maximum of 15 hours a week supplying instructional guidance spread across 48 classrooms, seven grade levels and two content areas. An interview with the Math Coach indicated this was not sufficient time to adequately supply instructional oversight to all areas of need or to be fully informed about the practices that are occurring school-wide. Interviews with faculty and staff indicated that support for the role of these coaching positions was not widespread, and some teachers questioned their effectiveness as instructional leaders. One teacher stated, "At times I question their (coaches) effectiveness... She is useful in organizing and making materials." Another

staff member indicated, “The coaches are glorified secretaries... I never see them... no one helps us with the kids.”

Finally, failure to attend to the specialized needs of special education students and English language learners has been well-documented in this report. A focus group with special education staff indicated that leadership was available to answer questions but that instructional support was not part of this role. There was no indication that instructional oversight occurs specifically for the ELL population, which constitutes 79 percent of the schools’ population of 1,176 students.

Because of the disparate vision throughout the school that surrounds the role of instructional leadership and the limited evidence to suggest that oversight exists to effectively guide teaching practices, it is the judgment of the Panel that – as defined and currently implemented – the roles and practices of instructional leadership at South Lawrence East are not of sufficient capacity to guide the necessary improvement initiatives at the school.

**B. Is there evidence that the school’s faculty supports the planned improvement efforts?**

Yes. Because the Comprehensive Education Plan and other improvement initiatives do not specify causal factors, the faculty and staff at South Lawrence East do not possess a thorough understanding of *how* instructional strategies can elicit increased student achievement. There is school-wide recognition, however, that improvement efforts are needed at SLE, as well as evidence to suggest implementation of current initiatives has occurred, despite the lack of sufficient instructional guidance. Therefore, it is the judgment of the Panel that the school’s faculty has adhered, and will continue to adhere, to the efforts planned to address performance gaps at South Lawrence East.

School-wide adherence to the Coalition of Essential Schools model as the guiding philosophy at South Lawrence East has been well documented. In interviews, faculty and staff were readily willing and able to discuss CES and the collaborative environment it has instilled within the school community. Furthermore, the SLE faculty is able to discuss the fundamentals of the CEP and other improvement plans at the school (see response to Question 1E). Results from the DOE teacher survey indicate that 86 percent of the staff “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that the school has a “well-defined plan for reaching student achievement goals.” In previous years, a school-wide emphasis has been placed on ELA and, as a result, teachers possess a better understanding of this academic area, as well as some of the instructional strategies that link to identified student weaknesses and performance. SLE faculty also spoke clearly of the shift in focus to math this year at the school, as well as the difficulties that still persist with these curricula – both with *Investigations* at the lower grade levels and *CMP* at the upper grade levels. One teacher stated (in regard to *CMP*), “I feel like we are building on sand, yet we were told just to do it.” This comment alludes to the insufficient instructional guidance that faculty and staff have received, particularly in respect to mathematics.

Classroom observation and interviews with staff indicated that journals, assessment binders and, in some cases, portfolios were being used. This further suggests the commitment of faculty to the improvement initiatives that have been set forth at SLE. But because the CEP does not possess clear direction as to how these strategies will affect student performance and because instructional oversight is composed primarily of activities, the use of assessment tools to guide classroom practices is currently undeveloped at South Lawrence East.

The Panel concluded that the faculty at SLE has made all of the adjustments asked of them, supporting identified areas of need and implementing planned improvement initiatives. Without adequate instructional leadership and further guidance, however, a complete understanding of teaching and learning practices necessary to increase performance at the school is likely to remain at a basic, procedural level.

### **C. Is the school receiving adequate guidance and support from the district leadership?**

Yes. The District is supplying South Lawrence East with at least adequate curriculum resources and personnel support. However, because the District approved a Comprehensive Education Plan that fails to address the needs of special education students and English language learners and because some of the programs in place at SLE vary from the District initiatives, it is unclear whether District guidance fully supports the improvement initiatives at the school.

Reports from school staff and leadership, as well as classroom observations, indicate that the District is supplying South Lawrence East with at least adequate support in terms of resources. The School Leadership Report indicates that the District has provided the school with “numerous” resources, including curriculum materials and supplemental mathematics materials. Evidence of classroom resources was also evident in Panel observations. Interviews with faculty and staff suggested that they felt they had at least ample materials to support classroom instruction.

The Superintendent indicated that the District also supports the efforts at SLE by supplying them with additional professional development funding to continue to utilize Tufts University consultants to oversee the implementation of the LRR model, as well as the Readers and Writers Workshop, since these programs are not consistent with the District’s initiatives. The principal corroborated that these additional resource allocations were in place.

The Leadership Report and interviews with school administration also indicated that the assistance of the District’s director for assessment and accountability has been invaluable in gathering and disseminating data reports to use in improvement planning. Student performance data reports abound throughout the school and, although they are not fully

utilized to inform instruction, the availability of these reports also indicates at least adequate District support.

Besides providing necessary resources to the school, it is unclear how much specific guidance South Lawrence East receives from the District. The CES reform initiative and the literacy program/ ELA curriculum are not District-level initiatives. Based on interviews with school and District administrators, there does not appear to have been rigorous oversight at the District level to determine whether these initiatives and related practices were resulting in increased student achievement at the school. This indicated to the Panel a lack of urgency – by both District administration and school leadership – in trying to determine why gains in student performance have been insufficient over the past five years, despite the resources and the continuance of programs in place at the school during this time.

Of critical concern to the Panel was the District's approval of a Comprehensive Education Plan that failed to specifically address special education and ELL students. More than 900 students, or 79 percent of the population at South Lawrence East, are students whose First Language is Not English (FLNE). The failure of the CEP, other planned initiatives and instructional leadership to specifically address the learning needs of this population – who make up the large majority of the aggregate – is a significant gap in improvement efforts.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although South Lawrence East has dedicated leadership and faculty, the conditions to ensure successful implementation of the Comprehensive Education Plan are not fully in place. The apparent lack of instructional leadership and non-specific oversight supplied by the District are of concern to the Panel. The school's analysis of performance results is at a rudimentary level and, as a result, does not adequately identify root causes for the weaknesses. Objectives are not likely to drive student learning or instructional practice. The CEP does not provide the necessary specificity to guide improvement efforts, neither in its written form nor in its current delivery, to address the persistently low student performance rates at the school.

South Lawrence East does not currently have a sound improvement plan in place, nor does it have all of the necessary conditions needed to promote significant increases in student performance.

**APPENDIX A  
Team Members**

**Megan Tupa**, Panel Chair, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

**Mary Mader**, Panel Co-chair, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

**Dr. Denise Delorey**, Panel Coordinator, School Performance Evaluation, MA Department of Education, Malden, MA

**Sandra Moriarty**, Panel Member, Principal, Eastford Road School, Southbridge Public Schools, Southbridge, MA

**Cheryl Forster**, Panel Member, Principal, Ipswich Middle School, Ipswich Public Schools, Ipswich, MA

**Mary H. Bourque**, Panel Member, Asst. Superintendent, Chelsea Public Schools, Chelsea, MA

**Robert T. Ackerman**, Panel Member, Asst. Principal, Page Hilltop Elementary School, Ayer Public Schools, Ayer, MA

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**APPENDIX B**  
**UNDER-PERFORMING PANEL REVIEW SCHEDULE**  
**Detailed Schedule for Review Panel School Site Visit**

**The times specified on the following schedule may be adjusted slightly to align with the daily schedule and practices in each of the schools being reviewed.**

**Day 1**

- 9:00 – 9:30 a.m.* Panel chairperson and panel coordinator meet to discuss and clarify roles, prepare for the first team meeting, and review general logistics/schedule for the review. [location: hotel]
- 9:30 – 11:30 a.m.* **Team meeting # 1:** team meets for the first time to discuss each panelist’s individual analysis; team forms preliminary judgments on key questions. [location: hotel]
- 12:00—2:00 p.m.* Panelists meet with Principal (and one other school-based individual, if appropriate). [location: the school]
- 2:00 – 3:00 p.m.* Panelists meet with School Leadership Team
- 3:00 – 4:00 p.m.* Panelists meet with the district Superintendent (and Assistant Superintendent, if appropriate). [location: school]
- 4:30 – 6:00 p.m.* **Team meeting # 2:** panelists synthesize interview information, further define findings, prepare questions, and develop a team strategy for Day 2 of the review. [location: hotel]

**Day 2**

**All activities take place in the school**

- 7:30—8:00 a.m.* Panelists meet with the Principal
- 8:00—8:30 a.m.* Panelists meet with the School Council
- 8:30—9:00 a.m.* Panelists meet with Focus Groups. The Panel Review Coordinator and the Principal will identify participants for each Focus Group. The groups will be organized, as appropriate, to include groups of individuals who can respond to questions designed for parents, students, classroom teachers, curriculum facilitators, content-area specialists, grade-level instructors, or other specific inquiry groups.

Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D	Panelist E
Focus Group	Focus Group	Focus Group	Focus Group	Focus Group

9:00—11:00 a.m. Classroom observations and teacher interviews\*

	Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D	Panelist E
9-10 a.m.	Observe teacher 1 and teacher 2	Observe teacher 3 and teacher 4	Observe teacher 5 and teacher 6	Observe teacher 7 and teacher 8	Observe teacher 9 and teacher 10
10-11 a.m.	Interview teacher 1 and teacher 2 individually	Interview teacher 3 and teacher 4 individually	Interview teacher 5 and teacher 6 individually	Interview teacher 7 and teacher 8 individually	Interview teacher 9 and teacher 10 individually

11 a.m.—12:30 p.m. **Team meeting # 3:** panelists meet to discuss findings so far and to plan the remainder of the day (working lunch)

12:30—1:00 p.m. Panelists use time as needed to analyze findings and to gather more information.

1:00—2:00 p.m. Panelists meet with teachers in groups\*; consultant co-chair is free to work on report

	Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D	Panelist E
1:00-1:30	Teacher	Focus Group 1	Teacher	Focus Group 3	Prepare report
1:30-2:00	Teacher	Focus Group 2	Teacher	Focus Group 4	

2:00—2:30 p.m. Closing meeting with the principal to discuss next steps (all panelists are present)

2:30—5:00 p.m. **Team meeting # 4:** panelists deliberate and form conclusions